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HENRY SHALER WILLIAMS

1847-1918

Professor Henry Shaler Williams died in Havana, Cuba, on July 31, 1918, at the age of seventy-one years. During his lifetime he had been one of the leaders in his profession and was a pioneer in the modern practice of studying fossil faunas as units for investigation, as contrasted with the practice of collecting and describing fossil species.

Professor Williams spent his college days at Yale, where he graduated in 1868. His interest in natural science led him to continue his studies as a graduate student, a rather unusual practice in those days, and he was granted the Ph.D. degree in 1871. The following year he held the position of professor of natural history in the University of Kentucky, after which time a break occurred in his scientific career. For eight years he was engaged in business with his father and brothers, in Ithaca, New York, but during this whole period his real interest was in natural science, and he never gave up the idea of devoting his life to the pursuit of science.

Although his early scientific work in Yale had been in zoölogy, and he had made some contributions to the literature of that subject before 1872, when he returned to scientific work in 1880 he entered the faculty of geology in Cornell University. His earlier zoölogical interests naturally directed his geological work toward the field of paleontology, and he entered his new field of activity with the point of view of a man of science rather than as a professional geologist. His lack of close association with scientific work during the period immediately preceding his connection with the Cornell faculty led him to enter his new work with an independent attitude of mind, which is perhaps responsible, in part at least, for his early pioneer work. He at once set about the search for problems to solve, and he found them in plenty right at home. His own experience during those early days at Cornell led him to advise his students always to search for and solve the problems that were to be found in their own dooryards rather than to think that any problem worth solution must be sought for in distant parts of the earth. His exceedingly careful investigation of the geological section at Ithaca, with the careful collection of fossils from bed to bed and the study of their associations in faunas and faunules, and his observations upon the geologic range of species and their recurrence at different horizons in the section really brought to the attention of students of fossils a new field for research and new problems whose relations to the problems of the stratigraphic geologist were much more intimate than the mere search for and naming of new fossil species.

For a number of years he continued his studies of the fossil faunas of the Devonian in central New York, making careful comparisons between the faunal succession as he had found it at Ithaca and the succession in other sections farther west, which represented the same time interval. The results of these very careful observations upon the faunas and their stratigraphic relations led to his proposal of the doctrine of "shifting faunas" within the limits of a single basin, the movements of the various faunal associations being governed by changing environmental conditions. All these studies led him more and more to the consideration in its broader aspects of the succession of life forms upon the earth, and directed his studies into the field of organic evolution as exemplified by the actual geological history of organisms.

The unique character of Professor Williams' investigations of the Devonian faunas of central New York early called attention to his studies and led to his selection as director of the Devonian work of the United States Geological Survey, to which was also added the direction of the work upon the Carboniferous. His survey connection made it possible for him to extend his studies into broader fields but did not lead to the severing of his university ties. Among other problems his survey work led him to the study of the Devonian faunas of Maine, and his latest contributions to the literature of paleontology have had to do with the Devonian and Silurian fossils of that state.

In 1892 Professor Williams left Cornell University to become Sillman professor of geology in Yale University, where he succeeded

Professor James D. Dana. He remained in this position for twelve years, when he returned to Cornell and continued his work there until his retirement as emeritus professor of geology in 1912.

Professor Williams' name will always be associated with the development of American paleontology and more especially with the American Devonian. His more philosophical contributions, however, are applicable to the life of all periods.

As a teacher Professor Williams exercised a great influence in the encouragement of his students in research. He did not believe in directing each separate step which his pupils took, but he believed rather in leading them to search for their own problems and when found to solve them independently if possible. He considered the field of scientific paleontology to be limited in its possibilities for a livelihood, and consequently he never offered undue encouragement to prospective students to enter the work. To those who were bound to enter, however, he gave the best council and advice of which he was capable. He was especially a laboratory teacher, and he made his students feel that they were companions with him in research. He was a man of most amiable disposition and spirit, and his kindly smile could never fail to reach one's heart. He was a loyal friend and always rejoiced in the success of those who had come under his instruction.

STUART WELLER